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Breaking Down Barriers with Wordless Picturebooks: “The Silent Books Exhibition, from the World to Lampedusa and Back”¹

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Abstract

In 2012 the Italian branch of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) established a library on Lampedusa Island, Italy for the use of local children but also for the many refugee children arriving there from Africa and the Middle East. The challenge was to find books to appeal to children of different ages and from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds – books that could provide some respite for children traumatised by displacement and conflict. Wordless picturebooks were identified as an ideal genre, given they can be enjoyed by children of all ages without the restriction of language barriers. The Lampedusa Library initiative led to the creation of a collection of wordless picturebooks, comprising more than a hundred titles, donated from over twenty countries. One set of this collection remains in Lampedusa while another has evolved into a travelling exhibition, the “Silent Books Project”. Since 2013 this exhibition has toured many countries with the aim of inviting readers from different cultural backgrounds both to engage with these picturebooks and reflect upon the reasons for the Silent Books Project’s existence in the first place. In this article I will first discuss the origins of the Silent Book project on Lampedusa Island and provide a brief overview of the IBBY organisation and its aims. Wordless picturebooks will then be situated within current academic research on picturebooks. Finally, a selection of titles chosen for the Silent Books project will be examined in more detail and some of the experiences involving the Silent Books Project’s visit to Ireland in spring 2017 will also be outlined. Highlighted in this article will be the silent power of pictures in such wordless narratives to aid child refugees in regaining some agency and to foster empathy in readers who have never been forced to leave their home.

Keywords: Wordless picture books, Child refugees, Silent Books project, IBBY

Reading makes immigrants of us all. It takes us away from home, but more important, it finds homes for us everywhere.

(Jean Rhys, author of *Wide Sargasso Sea*)

¹ This is the full title of the Silent Books Exhibition visits to IBBY national sections around the world.

Introduction

The name “Lampedusa” conjures up two very conflicting images. The first is that of an idyllic tourist destination with golden sandy beaches and glistening clear blue bays, popular with sun-worshippers and nature-lovers alike. Since the early 2000s, however, Lampedusa has become a destination of a different sort. Its name has become synonymous with images of migrants landing on those same golden beaches after hazardous boat journeys across the sea from nearby North Africa. Lampedusa is the last Italian stop before Africa, or, to look at it the other way round from the migrants’ perspective, “the door of Europe”, a safe transit point in what is often a long, traumatic journey of displacement and upheaval. The majority of these migrants are people fleeing conflicts in Africa and the Middle East, with most arriving by boat from nearby Libya, over what is considered one of the deadliest sea route crossings in the Mediterranean.² Since the aftermath of Arab Spring revolts in Tunisia and Libya in 2011, more than 35,000 refugees have arrived on Lampedusa before transferring to other locations in Italy and further afield. As a tiny island, about 20km² in size, these numbers far outstrip that of the indigenous population of approximately 6,500 people.³ Notwithstanding the huge numbers of migrants, housed in an overcrowded Reception Centre, the islanders have been singled out on more than one occasion in the past for their hospitable attitudes towards these temporary, often traumatised, visitors to Lampedusa. For example, the islanders were nominated as a group for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. More recently, in Spring 2017, the island’s former mayor Giuseppina Nicolini, who spearheaded initiatives to welcome migrants to Lampedusa and raise awareness about their plight, was awarded the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize by UNESCO. Her successor Salvatore Martello, elected mayor in June 2017, is less welcoming towards migrants, a significant number of whom are children. His election signals a changing attitude on Lampedusa, on the part of some at least.⁴ Nonetheless, migrants still arrive in their thousands and many islanders and volunteer organisations continue to try and improve their lives for the duration of their stay.

The initiative which is the focus of this article is linked to the establishment of the first children’s library on Lampedusa in 2012 by the Italian branch of an organisation called the *International Board on Books for Young People* (IBBY). It has been described as:

[a] library for the island's children, so that they can learn to tell the difference between the horizon and the border, for children just passing through, so that Lampedusa can be more than just a staging post on their journey. Because through books we can build an ethos of welcome, respect and participation.⁵

As is evident from Nicolini’s words, this library is not just intended for the young inhabitants of Lampedusa but also for child migrants staying in the Reception Centre. Thus, it is a space that facilitates encounters between the indigenous and migrant populations through books. It has also fostered engagement with the wider world as volunteers from the international community regularly visit and work in the library, engaging in bibliophilic and other creative

² On 3 October 2013, for example, an estimated 360 migrants travelling from Libya perished at sea off the coast of Lampedusa in what is now known as the Lampedusa Boat disaster. For further information, see:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/22/lampedusa-boat-tragedy-migrants-africa>

For statistics and further information on migrant deaths in the Mediterranean, visit the International Organisation for Migrants (IOM) UK website <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>

³ <https://www.citypopulation.de/php/italy-sicilia.php?cityid=084020>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/08/lampedusa-turns-back-mayor-refugee-crisis-italy-north-africa>

⁵ Giuseppina (Giusi) Nicolini, “Foreword to IBBY Silent Books Catalogue 2013”, <http://www.ibby.org/awards-activities/activities/silent-books/>

activities, known as the IBBY Camps.⁶ In 2014, for example, twenty volunteers from other parts of Italy and Canada visited Lampedusa for a week in November and engaged with approximately a thousand children in the library in over forty events, such as storytelling and illustration. These volunteers included teachers, librarians and illustrators. They also trained some of the high school children and adults on the island to enable them to continue a number of the library activities after their departure.⁷

Lampedusa Library houses a special collection of books, called the Silent Book Collection, the brainchild of Deborah Soria, a member of the IBBY Italia committee. The name ‘Silent Books’ refers to the fact that every book in this collection is a purely visual narrative, devoid of text (apart from the title). These wordless picturebooks were donated from a number of IBBY’s seventy-two national sections in 2013 and comprised multiple sets of 111 book titles from twenty-three countries across four continents. One set of picturebooks was delivered to Lampedusa library while another set is archived in the *Palazzo della Esposizioni*, a documentation and research centre in Rome, as a resource for teachers, researchers and the public at large. A third set laid the foundations for what has now become a biennial travelling exhibition of Silent Books to IBBY’s national sections, including Ireland. This collection is expanded and updated on a regular basis. Before discussing the Silent Books project in more detail, some examples from the collection, and its initial visit to Ireland in 2017, it would be useful to first provide a little more information on IBBY itself. Coincidentally, the organisation’s founder, Jella Lepman,⁸ was herself an exile who believed passionately in the power of books to transform and improve children’s lives and to promote intercultural understanding.

The International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY)

IBBY began with Jella Lepman (1891-1970) a Jewish exile from Stuttgart who fled Nazi Germany in 1936. On her return to post-war Germany from Britain, where she worked as a journalist and writer, Lepman was put in charge of youth re-education in the US-occupied zone, particularly around the area of Munich. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, when many of Germany’s infrastructures were devastated by allied bombings, basic necessities were in short supply. Yet, Lepman strongly believed that German children needed books, just as much as food or medicine. Books would open their minds to other perspectives in the world after twelve years of exposure to little else other than Nazi propaganda and would provide entertainment and respite from any traumas they had experienced. She appealed to the publishing houses of nations around the world, many of them Germany’s former enemies, for donations of their national children’s literature and the response was overwhelmingly generous. Lepman’s determination and inspiration led to the establishment of the International Youth Library (IYL) in Munich in 1949, now the largest library for international children’s books in the world.⁹ She subsequently founded the International Board on Books for Young People

⁶ For general information on the IBBY Camps, visit: <http://annoeuropeo2018.beniculturali.it/en/eventi/camp-la-biblioteca-ibby-lampedusa/>

⁷ For more information on the 2014 IBBY Camp, visit the IBBY Italia webpage: <http://www.ibby.org/awards-activities/activities/silent-books/silent-books-3rd-ibby-camp-in-lampedusa>

⁸ The most detailed source of information on Jella Lepman and the foundation of IBBY can be found in Lepman’s translated autobiography, *A Bridge of Children’s Books: The Inspiring Autobiography of a Remarkable Woman*. Dublin: O’Brien Press, 2002. This provides the basis for my discussion here on Lepman and the origins of IBBY. See also: Coghlan, Valerie, ‘The Founder: Jella Lepman.’ In: *Bookbird. A Journal of International Children’s Literature*, Vol. 55, No. 4, 2017, 70-74.

⁹ For further information on the International Youth Library, visit their website here: www.ijb.de/en/about-us.html

(IBBY) in 1953 in Zurich. IBBY's headquarters have remained in Switzerland, located today in Basel, and its core mission, too, remains the same - to bring young people and books together.¹⁰ Two of IBBY's key objectives are to promote international understanding through children's books and to give children everywhere the opportunity to have access to books with high literary and artistic standards. Bearing these objectives in mind I will now focus on the Silent Books project which epitomises Lepman's and IBBY's aims.

The Silent Books Project and Wordless Picturebook Research

Very much in the spirit of Lepman's actions in contacting publishing houses across the world for donations of books for children who were the victims of World War II, Deborah Soria of IBBY Italia has continued this legacy. Soria appealed for donations of wordless picturebooks from IBBY's national sections to be sent to the library in Lampedusa for the many children there seeking refuge from more recent conflicts. Wordless picturebooks were chosen as the most accessible books for children of different backgrounds, ages and linguistic contexts - a choice that circumvents issues such as having to select books in particular languages or their available translations. Instead bright and colourful books of high artistic quality from all over the world have been made available to these young readers. Through the universal language of images and art rather than words, it is hoped that those young visitors to Lampedusa Library who fled precarious circumstances in their home countries can forget pain and trauma for a few hours and lose themselves in these wordless narratives – books that transcend not just geographical borders but also the boundaries of language and culture. The beauty of this initiative is that every child, no matter what their reading ability, language and cultural background will be able to engage with these books and form their own narrative from it. This ability to create one's own narrative is, of course, empowering, rendering agency to a child refugee, one of the most disempowered and vulnerable of all members of society.¹¹ Moreover, such narratives can help raise awareness and empathy amongst the children living permanently on the island who themselves have not experienced exile, the trauma of war or have been uprooted from their families, homes or countries. This is why this particular children's picturebook project with its wide appeal to a diverse audience (both migrants and those who have never had to migrate), continues to find resonance on an international scale, from the small island of Lampedusa to the world and back.

Picture books in general have been the subject of much academic interest and a substantial amount of international research has been conducted on those containing both text and illustrations, ranging from Perry Nodelman's seminal study, *Words about Pictures: the Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*¹² to Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott's *How Picture Books Work*,¹³ Sandra L. Beckett's *Crossover Picturebooks: A Genre for all Ages*¹⁴ and Nodelman, Hamer and Reimer's more recent co-edited publication, *More Words about*

¹⁰ For more information on IBBY, its objectives and activities worldwide, visit: www.ibby.org

¹¹ For further discussion on wordless narratives and child migrant readership agency, see Arizpe, Evelyn, Martinez-Roldain, Carmen & Teresa Colomer, *Visual journeys through wordless narratives: an international inquiry with immigrant children and The Arrival*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. This pedagogical study focuses on experiences of child migrants reading a wordless narrative in classroom contexts in Glasgow, Barcelona and Arizona. The wordless narrative in question is Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*, Melbourne: Lothian Books, 2006 which will be discussed in more detail later on.

¹² Nodelman, Perry. *Words about Pictures: the Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988.

¹³ Nikolajeva, Maria & Carole Scott. *How Picture Books Work*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

¹⁴ Beckett, Sandra L. *Crossover Picturebooks: A Genre for all Ages*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

*Pictures: Current research on Picture Books and Visual/Verbal Texts for Young People*¹⁵ to cite just a few examples. Interactions between text and illustration in picturebooks are the main focus of these studies and the different ways in which these interactions contribute towards the creation of certain images: images formed in the reader's mind through words as well as through illustrations themselves. Furthermore, in such studies it is observed that illustrations can serve the purpose of enhancing the text, making it more visually attractive and providing stimulus by inviting interaction and discussion between readers, often an adult and (pre-literate) child. In *Words about Pictures*, for instance, Nodelman describes the function of pictures in picturebooks as "a visual aid, a means of transmitting information to inexperienced listeners and readers that could not be conveyed by words alone."¹⁶ Essentially, what Nodelman suggests here is that picturebooks have a certain narrative power conveyed by images which, nonetheless, are incomplete without words. Yet, the increasing number of picturebooks being published with no text (apart from their title), are not just books that fall into the pre-literate/inexperienced reader category or whose narratives are limited in meaning. Some of these books are highly sophisticated, thanks to the skilful artistry of their illustrator and can pose narrative challenges for the reader, demanding in some cases a high level of visual literacy.¹⁷ Indeed, in one report on the engagement of schoolchildren with a travelling Silent Book Exhibition in France, it was noted that due to the complete lack of textual clues in the narrative and titles in many different foreign languages and scripts, "[s]ome of the older children were concerned about not being able to read or even guess the titles of the books; other were rather perplexed that some of the books had to be read from right to left."¹⁸

Although an increasing number of wordless picturebooks are now being published and gaining international recognition, Missiou and Anagnostopoulou have highlighted that "[d]espite the fact that wordless books have become 'a contemporary publishing trend'...extensive research on it has been limited."¹⁹ These Greek researchers point out that apart from Sandra Beckett's aforementioned publication on crossover picturebooks, "no in-depth research has been published since."²⁰ Beckett's book, which dedicates one chapter out of six to a wide range of wordless picturebooks, focusses on the crossover of readership in terms of age categories. For those unfamiliar with the term 'crossover' in Children's Literature Studies, it usually refers to books with a dual appeal for adult and child readerships. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series is perhaps the most famous example of recent times. Missiou and Anagnostopoulou's own article on wordless picturebooks provides an insightful examination of selected illustrators' techniques in depicting time and space visually, thus contributing another new and interesting perspective to research on this emerging genre.

¹⁵ Nodelman, Perry, Naomi Hamer and Mavis Reimer (eds). *More Words about Pictures: Current research on Picture Books and Visual/Verbal Texts for Young People*. New York: Routledge 2017.

¹⁶ Nodelman (1988), page 4.

¹⁷ Visual literacy broadens and expands on the more usual notion of literacy, which signifies interpretation of a written or printed text. It is based on the idea that pictures can be 'read' and that their meaning can be communicated through a process of reading whereby the reader must interpret, negotiate and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image (Definition paraphrased from <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/digital-literacy-research/31927>).

¹⁸ Cotton, Penni, 'Livres sans paroles: Lampedusa à Montolieu. IBBY Italia's Silent Picturebook Collection goes to France.' In: *Bookbird. A Journal of International Children's Literature*, Vol. 55, No.1, 2017, 44-49, Here page 45.

¹⁹ Missiou, Marianna & Diamanti Anagnostopoulou 'Challenging Time and Space in Wordless Picturebooks'. In: *interjuli: Internationale Kinder- und Jugendliteraturforschung*, 2, 2016, 72-87. Here, page 72.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Missiou and Anagnostopoulou omit the following publication, possibly because it focuses on just one wordless narrative in an educational studies context: Arizpe, Evelyn, Martinez-Roldain, Carmen & Teresa Colomer, *Visual Journeys through Wordless Narratives: an International Inquiry with Immigrant Children and The Arrival*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

Closer to home, in a shorter article entitled ‘A World without Words’,²¹ Houlihan introduces the reader to the term ‘Silent books’, having encountered such works showcased in the second International Silent Book Competition at the 2015 Bologna Children’s Book Fair. In her article Houlihan is keen to emphasize that: “The silence does not refer to the loss of voice due to lack of printed text but rather to the silent power of the pictures.”²² She also refers to the crossover appeal of wordless picture books in terms of how such works speak to readers of all ages. Significantly, however, she uses the term ‘crossover’ in a broader fashion than Beckett when describing how such silent books “can cross borders effortlessly, whether it be of age, *nationality or language*.”²³ As these books communicate with no words and do so powerfully across linguistic and cultural boundaries, I would support this more expanded definition of the term “crossover” with reference to wordless picturebooks to include not just readers of all ages but also readers of all nationalities, cultures and languages. Thus, wordless picture books more than other genres can be books for all people of all ages, language, colour, creed and culture; they empower their audiences more equally than other narrative forms. The Silent Book project certainly demonstrates this more expanded understanding of crossover books, both in Lampedusa and in the biennial travelling exhibitions that have been crossing borders since 2013. In the following section, I highlight three of the books in the Silent Books collection to demonstrate the high quality and wide variety of illustrative techniques used. This will underline how wordless picturebooks are *crossover* in the fullest sense of the word and may be more thought-provoking and challenging than perhaps might be first assumed.

Three Examples from the Silent Books Collections (2013-2015-2017)

The Arrival

Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*, which features in the 2013 Silent Books collection, was first published in Australia in 2006²⁴ and took five years of intensive research to complete.²⁵ The intricacy of Tan’s images and attention to detail are testimony to his scrupulous approach to his work. This picturebook or album is divided into six chapters, focusing on the theme of the family bond which is disrupted when the father has to leave home. Immigration, alienation and the challenges of adapting to a new culture and unfamiliar environment are all dealt with here through a series of images in sequential panels. It is both futuristic and old-fashioned in atmosphere. The sepia tones and items such as old photographs suggest a nostalgic remembering, so that *The Arrival* reads like a memoir of someone’s journey from another time and another (invented) place. The surreal elements of Tan’s created world, such as the unusual creatures and buildings, invoke a certain sense of universality – it could be set anywhere – so that no matter what their origins, the reader is bound both to identify with aspects of this story but also to sense the same alienation as the protagonist. Or to quote from Tan, “There is no guidance as to how the images might be interpreted, and we must ourselves search for meaning and seek familiarity in a world where such things are either scarce or concealed.”²⁶

In the final chapter of this highly evocative narrative, the mother and daughter are reunited with the father and the story ends on a reassuring note. When the daughter of the

²¹ Houlihan, Ciara, ‘A World without Words’ *INIS*, the Children’s Book Ireland Magazine, 45, 2015, 2-3.

²² *Ibid.*, page 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, page 3. My italics for emphasis.

²⁴ Tan, Shaun, *The Arrival*. Melbourne: Lothian Children’s Books, 2006.

²⁵ Lassén-Seger, Maria, Reading Guide for *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan, Recipient of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award 2011. Available at:

http://www.alma.se/Documents/2013/L%C3%A4snycklar,%20jan%202013/Reading_guide_Tan_Arrival.pdf

²⁶ www.shauntan.net/books/the-arrival.html

immigrant in turn aids a lost newcomer in their adopted home, it suggests that the protagonist and his family have adapted well to their new existence. As Tan, a native of Perth, has pointed out, the theme of migration relates to his personal background which is part-Chinese, Malaysian, Irish and English and that he is “routinely attracted to ideas of belonging, difference, and the conceptual boundary between what is familiar or ‘normal’ and what is exotic or ‘weird’”.²⁷

Bounce Bounce

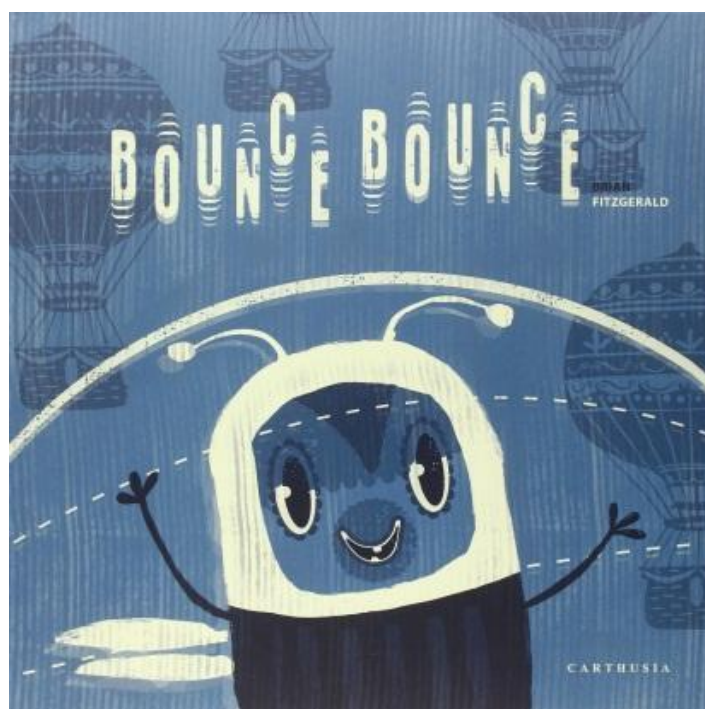


Illustration from front cover of *Bounce Bounce* © Brian Fitzgerald, 2014

Dublin-based Irish illustrator and artist Brian Fitzgerald was the winner of the aforementioned International Silent Book Competition at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair in 2014 with *Bounce Bounce*.²⁸ This visual narrative is listed in the 2015 Silent Books Collection. It also deals with the theme of travel and encounters with the unknown, albeit in a very different manner to Tan’s work, as is obvious from the outset. Bright and attractive colours are used here and Fitzgerald’s artistry is both playful and whimsical. The protagonist in *Bounce Bounce* is evidently not human, although its features are humanlike. Rather, it is humorously depicted as an appealing, if also slightly worried-looking, alien who has been forced to travel from home to another planet. This new environment looks very much like Earth except that animals, birds and sea creatures, rather than humans, populate the pages and conduct actions normally carried out by people, such as travelling in planes, boats and even hot-air balloons.

²⁷ Tan, Shaun, ‘Strange Migrations’, 33rd IBBY Congress Keynote, Imperial College London 2012. Available at: www.shauntan.net/comments1.html

²⁸ Fitzgerald, Brian, *Bounce Bounce*. Milan: Carthusia 2014. For more information on Brian Fitzgerald’s work, visit: www.brianfitzer.ie



Illustration from *Bounce Bounce* © Brian Fitzgerald, 2014

Centring the narrative around characters other than humans adds to the appeal of this visual narrative for young readers but may also lends itself to creating a safe distance for any who may have experienced involuntary travel and forced displacement. The alien bounces from page to page (and from one new experience to another) in its protective balloon stimulating the reader's curiosity to turn over the page and see what it will encounter next. In direct contrast to Tan's *The Arrival*, in Fitzgerald's book it is the protagonist more so than the environment that represents the unfamiliar. Yet, from this inverted perspective of an alien in the reader's familiar environment, here again the reader is encouraged to empathise and imagine what it must be like for a stranger to suddenly experience cultural dislocation, trying to make sense of the unknown. The little alien's sometimes perplexed, at other times surprised, reactions suggest a certain level of vulnerability and bewilderment in this regard. However, despite the forced departure from home and encounters with perceived perils, *Bounce Bounce* ends with a positive and important message which highlights the traveller's resilience - when the alien's protective balloon finally bursts, it finds that exposure to unfamiliar things and real engagement with his new environment can be a source of delight and wonder rather than a threat.



Illustration from *Bounce Bounce* © Brian Fitzgerald, 2014

The Farmer and the Clown

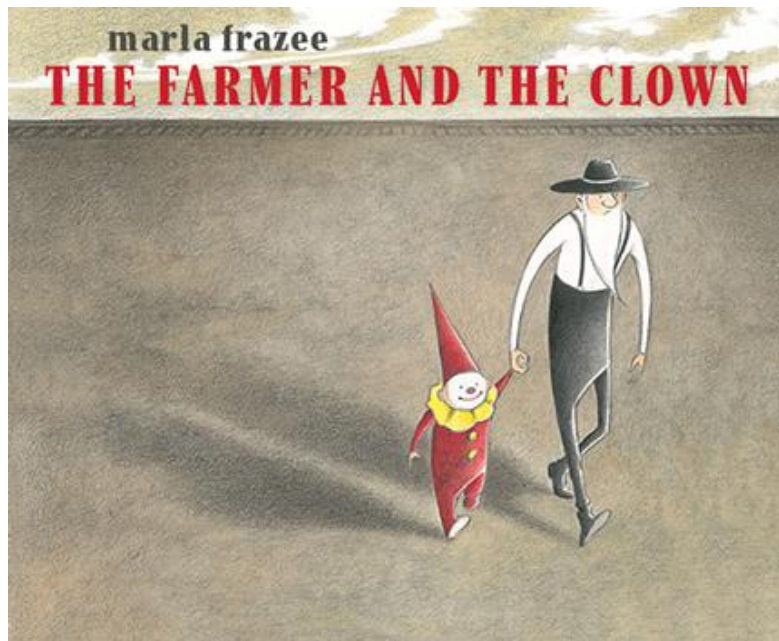


Illustration from front cover of *The Farmer and the Clown*, © Marla Frazee, 2014

The most recent collection of Silent Books (2017) includes *The Farmer and the Clown*²⁹ by American illustrator and two times Caldecott Honour medallist Marla Frazee. This is a poignant but ultimately uplifting narrative about a toddler clown who becomes separated from his family when he falls out of the train in which their circus troupe is travelling. The displaced young clown lands in what initially appears to be a rather empty and inhospitable landscape. However, he is rescued and befriended by an elderly local farmer who lives alone in his solitary farmhouse. The skilfully paced sequence of beautifully detailed illustrations guide the reader through the story and we ‘read’ how the initially bemused farmer takes his unexpected little guest in for the night, feeds and washes him and watches over him while he sleeps until his parents return the next day for him. On departure, it is clear that the elderly farmer and young clown are sad to take leave of one another and swap their hats as tokens of their newly formed friendship. A monkey from the circus follows the farmer home, reassuring the reader that at least he will continue to have company. *The Farmer and the Clown* recounts the touching and humorous story of what first appears to be an improbable friendship as the two main characters are of such very different backgrounds and ages. Through a series of images presented in quick succession we see how a bond quickly develops between them, as they teach each other their own particular skills. For example, the young clown shows the farmer how to juggle and further on we see the little clown learning how to help the farmer with his farm work.

²⁹ Frazee, Marla. *The Farmer and the Clown*. New York: Beach Lane Books, 2014.



Illustration from The Farmer and the Clown © Marla Frazee, 2014

The story suggests that if we are open in our encounters with others (and Otherness), we have much to learn from one another. Certainly, in this charming visual narrative it is clear that the farmer and clown greatly enjoy each other's company and the young clown's evident joy in being reunited with his own people is tinged with sadness at having to move on and say goodbye. It is also a reassuring tale about the compassion and kindness of strangers as well as the importance of family and friendships.



Illustration from The Farmer and the Clown © Marla Frazee, 2014

The Silent Books Visit to Ireland

Having provided a brief overview of a few of the books in the collection, I now turn to the IBBY Silent Books Exhibition visit to Ireland which lasted from 1 April to 18 June in 2017. Silent Books was hosted by four public libraries in Ireland: one in Tralee, Co Kerry and three libraries in the Dublin area: Ballyroan, Tallaght and dlr lexIcon in Dún Laoghaire. I attended the launch of the Silent Books Exhibition in dlr lexIcon on 8 May 2017.³⁰ School children were also present and they later engaged in activities involving the Silent Book collection. Unlike the situation in Lampedusa Library, most of these young visitors to the dlr lexIcon library were not refugees and would have had limited contact with them. Reading the colourful wordless picturebooks on display in the library was a disarming and engaging way to begin conversations with these children in Irish schools about exile and war.



Launch of Silent Books Exhibition, dlr LexIcon, 8 May 2017. L.toR. (standing): Former Irish Children's Laureate and award-winning Irish children's book illustrator PJ Lynch, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Council Chairperson Cormac Devlin and IBBY Ireland President Dr Jane O'Hanlon. Photograph © Áine McGillicuddy

The travelling Silent Books Exhibition, therefore, helps raise awareness and stimulate empathy by explaining why this exhibition exists in the first place. Julia Hope highlights the importance of this in relation to understanding and accepting child refugees when she writes, "Awareness is important both for the teachers of refugee children and also their classmates...whose friendship will be crucial to the acceptance of such children."³¹ So during the Silent Books Exhibition's visit in 2017 children in Irish schools explored how Silent Books, with their universal stories beyond words, can both educate and comfort those traumatised by war, persecution or natural disasters. Using worksheets, provided by the dlr LexIcon library for instance, they tried to imagine the feelings that might accompany forced migration: from fear, anger and loneliness to more positive emotions such as relief and the hope of a better future.

³⁰ For more information on IBBY Ireland, visit <http://www.ibbyireland.com>

³¹ Julia Hope, "'One Day we had to run': the Development of the Refugee Identity in Children's Literature and its Function in Education." In: *Children's Literature in Education*, 39 (4) 2008, 295-304. Here, page 298.

The response to the exhibition was overwhelmingly positive, as evidenced by Dr Marian Keyes (Programmer of events and exhibitions at the dlr LexIcon):

The exhibition was an absolute gift...For many of the children, the diverse range of books on display proved enormously exciting as many of the illustrators would not be familiar to Irish audiences. Horizons were expanded.³²



Silent Books Exhibition, dlr LexIcon, 8 May 2017 Photograph © Áine McGillicuddy

‘Nation Creation’ was just one of the workshops centred around the Silent Books Exhibition visit to Ireland. It was designed and facilitated by children’s author Debbie Thomas and illustrator and Tatyana Feeney, also a children’s writer (both IBBY Ireland Committee members) and aimed at primary school children. Each workshop lasted two hours and started with the children browsing the exhibition of wordless picturebooks. The children learned that the books come from all over the world, and that the collection started in a library set up on Lampedusa partly for refugee children, hence the lack of words, making them accessible to all readers, regardless of language and culture. That led to the idea that refugees have lost their home and how distressing that must be. The children then invented a new nation in groups, using words and drawings.³³ In her article “Creating Nations from Silent Books”, Debbie Thomas provides a fascinating and thought-provoking account of the wide range of impressive ideas children came up with for their new nations as she delivered the workshops in various libraries hosting the Silent Books Exhibition. New countries included “Yorland, a country that welcomed everyone” to “Dolphin Island, where everyone owns a dolphin from the age of 12, and Cisilěň where an underwater tunnel gives safe passage to refugees arriving on the

³² Cited in Debbie Thomas, ‘Creating Nations from Silent Books’. In: *Bookbird, A Journal of International Children’s Literature*. Vol. 56, No. 4, 2018, 76-79. To find out more about this workshop, visit Debbie Thomas’s website at: <http://debbie-thomas.com/workshops>

³³ Paraphrased excerpt from an email communication with former Ballyroan Senior Librarian and IBBY Committee member Emma McDonald, 11.09.2018.

island.”³⁴ Thomas also comments on the fact that one of the common denominators in the workshops was that all the “nations” had a welcoming attitude towards refugees. In Thomas’s own words “the Nation Creation workshop has [...] proved huge fun, allowing participants to journey imaginatively from the horror of forced migration to the delight of dreaming up their ideal country.”³⁵ Building on the success of the 2017 exhibition, IBBY Ireland recently decided to purchase a set of the Silent Books collection which will be used as a resource by children, educators, writers, illustrators, librarians and the general public. The arrival and exhibition of this latest collection of Silent Books was dovetailed with the IBBY Ireland Annual lecture, hosted by DCU University of Sanctuary.³⁶ Most fittingly, this lecture entitled “Final Destination Lampedusa” was delivered by Deborah Soria, the woman who first launched this initiative on the tiny island of Lampedusa. Her inspiration has connected people of diverse backgrounds and languages across the world through books which break down barriers.

Conclusion

Reading of any kind can provide a form of escape, an opportunity for encounters with otherness and even a safe haven from certain memories and experiences, albeit temporarily. However, engaging with wordless picturebooks or silent books offers everybody the opportunity to read and interpret stories, regardless of age, language, literacy levels and cultural background – truly these are crossover picturebooks in the very broadest sense of that term. The Silent Books project continues to provide respite and enjoyment for young refugees. It also continues to facilitate thought-provoking, creative encounters with otherness and act as an impetus for reflection and discussion on war and exile for everyone. Who knows what the 2019 Silent Books collection will bring from the world to Lampedusa and back again!

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³⁴ See Debbie Thomas blog entry ‘Nation Creation on RTE’ at: <http://debbie-thomas.com/?s=dolphin+island+> (accessed on 8 January 2019). You can also view some schoolchildren presenting their created nations on Irish national television here: [http://www.rte.ie/player/ie/show/news2day-30001385/10730844/#_ =](http://www.rte.ie/player/ie/show/news2day-30001385/10730844/#_=)

³⁵ Thomas, ‘Creating Nations from Silent Books’ page 76.

³⁶ Dublin City University was the first university in Ireland to be designated a University of Sanctuary. You can find out more about this initiative here: <https://www.dcu.ie/sanctuary/index.shtml>

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